

Don't believe a word: The surprising truth about language (a review)

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Reviewed by Barry Tomalin

Barry Tomalin Glasgow Caledonian University London barrytomalin@aol.com

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'Don't believe a word' is usually a phrase meaning you shouldn't believe something you hear or read.

David Shariatmadari, an editor and columnist on the Guardian, a British daily newspaper, uses 'word' in its literal sense to mean vocabulary and extends it to other aspects of language analysis including grammar, punctuation and pronunciation. The result is a 'myth busting' exercise, puncturing common misconceptions about language and its use, using linguistic theory explained in a way non-linguists can understand.

Each of the nine chapters identifies and examines 'language myths', using arguments from linguistics to debunk them. Topics covered include language decline, changes in the use of language over time, the use of individual words, pronunciation, grammar, the understanding of communication patterns between humans and the animal world, translation, why some languages may be

considered 'better' than others and the theories of language and how it is learned. It is an informative, enjoyable and fascinating account of language and linguistics based on the study of individual words and expressions.

Shariatmadari dismisses accusations of the decline of language or 'language obesity' as British broadcaster, John Humphrys, once described it, by asserting that the use of words is constantly changing and renewing itself to meet new circumstances and incorporate changes in technology and lifestyle. Older generations may find adaptation difficult and accusations of language decline have existed in English since the 17th century, in German and Arabic as well. Shariatmadari makes no reference, however, to the appearance of fake news, or post-truth, or the decline of public language and the appeal to emotion rather than to facts.

In Chapter 2, *A word's origin is its true meaning*, the author attacks the concept of original meaning, citing the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's insight that *'the meaning of a word is its use in the language'*. He goes on to cite the philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, who wrote that *'words, by connecting passions with things, the present with the past and by making possible memory and imagination, create family, society, literature, history'*. In other words, changes in language use reflect changes in the culture, as Anna Wierzbicka points out, saying, *'there is a very close link between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language spoken by it'*.

Chapter 3 explores the role of changing pronunciation in the use of words and explains how we change our pronunciation to suit the social circle we are in or aspire to belong to. Stressing De Saussure's importance of parole (language usage) as opposed to langue (the system of language rules), Shariatmadari uses social psychologist Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory to show how we alter our speech when we interact with others. *'Using variables including accent rate, volume, pitch, word choice and even syntax we either converge, diverge or carry on'*. Among many examples, he cites the 'parsley massacre' in San Domingo in 1937 when the then president, Rafael Trujillo, seeking to ethnically cleanse his country of the French-speaking Haitians, told soldiers to carry

sprigs of parsley and get people to say what it was. San Domingo Spanish speaking citizens would say the word with a rolled 'r' but French speaking Haitians would use a French 'r'. If they did so they were liable to be shot dead on the spot.

In a fascinating chapter, Shariatmadari examines the ability of the animal world to communicate, including whales and dolphins, and in particular the work of researchers who have taught animals to understand and even produce human speech, albeit at a limited level. In doing so he examines the work of researchers who trained Alex (a parrot), Kanzi (a bonobo monkey) and Koko – a guerrilla who was said to be able to understand 2000 English words. Interestingly enough, Shariatmadari cites the results of 2008 research into 1,129 American pet owners as to whether their pets understood them. 19% of those interviewed answered 'Yes, completely' and 49% answered 'Yes, mostly'. Asked whether they felt they could understand when their pets communicated with them, for example by mewing (cats) or barking (dogs), the result was 18% 'Yes, completely' and 49% 'Yes, mostly'.

Chapter 5 revisits the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that the language you speak determines the way you think, a hypothesis that has since been largely debunked by linguists such as Ekkehart Malotki and replaced by Chomsky's research into common deep structures of grammar.

Interestingly enough, the key lies maybe in 'linguistic relativity' and its effect of culture. Cognitive scientist, Lena Boroditsky, conducted experiments to check on the effects of the gender of similar nouns in German and Spanish on cultural perception. The results are revealing. A word like 'key' (masculine in German but feminine in Spanish) revealed very different associations in German and in Spanish. German speakers chose words like 'hard' and 'jagged' whereas Spanish speakers chose words like 'lovely' and 'shiny'. The word 'bridge', which is masculine in German and feminine in Spanish, received similar responses. The Germans associated the word 'bridge' with 'pretty' and 'elegant' while Spanish speakers used 'strong, sturdy' and 'towering'. Shariatmadari also uses lexical field theory to explain how, as new words enter the language, other words in the same lexical field may shrink in usage. As an example, he suggests that the English word 'alt-right' (extreme right wing) has diminished the use of 'reactionary', 'fascist' or 'neocon.' Finally, in the chapter, Shariatmadari explores the idea of metalanguage, selecting basic terms to form a natural semantic metalanguage. This is the work of Anna Wierzbicka who identified 65 words from which more complex words can be formed. She describes them as 'primes' and there is no language in which these basic expressions do not exist. This will help translators reflect the exact meaning of words in a foreign language.

After a chapter on dialect, Shariatmadari addresses the notion of language and artificial intelligence (AI). To do so he cites Alan Turing's 1950 experiment comparing a conversation with a computer character, Mitsuku, with a real person. In 2018 Mitsuku won a prize as the most human-like AI, displaying conversational skills and identity but failing sometimes with less predictable questions and statements. For example, in answer to the author's statement, 'I am clothed and fed', Mitsuku replied, 'I don't know anyone named Clothed'.

The issue of AI and comprehension raises the question of politeness and empathy in conversation. Paul Grice, a British philosopher, identified the co-operative principle in conversation, which broke down into four maxims: quantity (informative), quality (truth), relation (relevant) and manner (clear). However, Grice also pointed out that people would often flout these maxims by mistake or by intention. Geoffrey Leech, the British linguist, added the politeness principle to Grice's maxims. The politeness principle included the use of tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. It remains to be seen whether AI can match the subtleties of language evoked in the politeness principle.

The final chapter looks at how language is learned and examines the theory of Noam Chomsky on

Universal Grammar (UG) as a brain function and how it has been modified by subsequent research. According to recent research, the key important factor in the development of language ability and language development is not a brain function but a cultural one – the need to communicate. As Shariatmadari summarises, *‘the crucial evolutionary advance that enabled language was the ability to identify with others, and put ourselves in their shoes. There is no isolated language module that allows linguistic competence to ‘grow’ in the brain as a result of a genetic blueprint. Language is the fruit of both the biological evolution of social thinking and the long cultural evolution of human societies. Two decades into the 21st century linguistics is entering an exciting phase. Those drawn to the subject as a*

study of communication, culture and history need no longer feel quite so unorthodox’. Shariatmadari describes language as a ‘schatzkammer’ (treasure house) and concludes: *‘Nearly twenty years after I first opened the door myself, I’ve found that – however much you study it – language is a subject that will never exhaust your capacity for wonder’*.

This is an academic survey written for lay people. That being said, the references are all in place and the theories and research of such thinkers as Chomsky, Pinker, de Saussure, Whorf and many others are clearly and interestingly presented. All teachers of languages and those interested in language theory and language change, both academically and recreationally, will find it enjoyable and illuminating.